

Getting children out on the water at a young age will see them catch the paddling bug.

# Paddle time

Welcome to Paddle Time. Paddling is one of AG Outdoor's core activities and it's easy to see why: paddling gives direct access to nature, offering a different perspective on water-borne adventures. With Australia's massive coastline, and an equally large number of rivers and lakes, it's not surprising that every third vehicle you see on the roads has a type of watercraft attached, as people head out in search of adventure in or on the Big Blue.

## Canoeing with the kids

Get your kids into a canoe early on and they'll learn much more than just how to paddle. It'll teach them many essential life skills all while enjoying an awesome water adventure. WORDS PAT KINSELLA PHOTOS TRAVIS FRENAY

PEOPLE WHO ENJOY the outdoors as adults typically had their first taste of adventure activities as children, and appreciation of such pursuits is a great gift to pass on to the next generation. Many parents introduce their kids to bushwalking, but paddling – and particularly open-boat canoeing – is another activity that can be fantastic for young families.

Water-based adventures experienced at a young age and shared with family members often create strong and enduring memories, which can translate into lifelong interests and help develop crucial skills. Paddling, for example, encourages

forward planning, risk assessment and teamwork, as well as providing exercise and enjoyment – quality time all round.

In the right environment and with appropriate safety measures in place, girls and boys can start enjoying paddling trips from when they're toddlers. A canoe is especially well suited to such adventures, because most models will allow you to get the whole family in the boat together – as well as the dog and a picnic.

Travis Frenay is a highly qualified canoe instructor and assessor for Australian Canoeing, who has a young family and owns Paddle &

It doesn't take much to ensure kids have fun on the water: a PFD, a suitable destination, and away they go.



Travis Frenay's son, Samson, tackled his first canoe trip at four months of age.

Portage Canoes. A lifelong open-boat paddler, he points out that canoes have several important advantages over kayaks for young families, starting with space and comfort.

"A canoe can swallow an unfathomable amount of gear and equipment," says Travis. "Choosing a boat with just two seats doesn't mean that the canoe can only carry two people – the payload of a canoe often exceeds the requirements for two people to go on a week-long journey, so the addition of a couple of smaller occupants isn't going to create any trouble.

"Extra, temporary, seats can be added, or kids may choose to create a comfortable seat on the floor. It's crucial, though, to make sure that any extra seats have a low centre of gravity so that the new occupants contribute to the canoe's stability rather than compromise it. A kids' plastic outdoor chair with the legs cut short makes for a great temporary seat that can be added anywhere."

## GETTING STARTED

### Safety First

When you're introducing kids to any outdoor pursuit your number one consideration has to be safety. This is particularly true in the case of canoeing, when you might be dealing with moving water, obstacles, tides, swell, surf and exposure to cold conditions.

You need to get children used to wearing a proper PFD as a matter of course, so they don't even think about it – like a bike helmet. Make sure it's comfortable for them to wear – that will definitely help. Younger infants will require a child-specific PFD, one with a design that will support their head and keep it above water, and also have a strap between their legs so they don't pop out of it.

Be mindful not to scare children away from healthy pursuits right from the outset, though. While it's important to explain to kids why they have to dress appropriately, wear a PFD and what to do in the event of a capsizing, you should keep the experience a positive adventure at all times.

### Keep 'em keen

It's crucial when introducing children to any new outdoor pursuit that you don't let negative experiences cloud their first memories of the activity. If you let them get cold, hungry, bored or scared during their first outing, chances are you'll struggle to get them overly enthused about going out on the water with you again.

**You need to get children used to wearing a proper PFD as a matter of course, so they don't even think about it. . .**



Don't be afraid to give your youngsters a paddle so they feel more a part of the adventure.

Kids have memories like elephants and will store negative experiences for years. Keep your early paddling adventures short and sweet, getting to the pull-out while they're still keen to continue – this will keep them excited about getting out on the water next time. Make sure they're wearing good warm gear, and take an emergency supply of lollies just in case you're gone longer than you expect to be.

Paint paddling as a fun experience right from the start, for example by promising to take kids out in the kayak or canoe as a reward for doing well at school or for good behaviour.

### TRAV'S TIPS

"We try to make canoeing fun for the kids and it really isn't hard. We let them choose a few of their own items to pack that they get to take responsibility for. We also have room to bring things that will make them comfortable such as a folding camp chair and a hammock. A few edible treats certainly don't hurt, either!"

### Get geared up

Besides their own PFD and some warm clothing, get the children some canoeing equipment of their own – this will keep them enthusiastic and make them feel involved. Kids' canoe paddles are a nice idea, and a canoe barrel is also a great

investment as it's a good vessel for storing food and/or equipment (including books and toys).

### TRAV'S TIPS

"Our kids like to know where their things are and a barrel is a great bit of kit that they can access themselves. Allowing them to add their 'special items' at the top of the barrel means that they can unscrew the lid and get to them whenever they need to."

### Plan your paddle

Do your homework and paddle a stretch of water yourself, alone, before you take kids to the same spot. Make note of any potential hazards such as strainers and identify additional pull-out points should you need to call an early end to the adventure. Starting on a lake, a calm bay or a slow-paced river is highly recommended.

### TRAV'S TIPS

"A flatwater venue that's not overly wind-prone is going to increase your chances of having an enjoyable trip. If the conditions are challenging and you're obviously stressed then it's likely going to have a negative effect on their experience."

### Make it an adventure

Choose the location of your trips carefully. Make each outing an adventure with a mission objective and weight the odds of success in your favour by doing a recce of the place first to familiarise yourself with natural features and points of interest. For example, you might set kids the task of trying



Having plenty of pull-out spots along your route keeps the kids engaged in the paddling day.

to spot a particular animal – such as flying foxes – and then take them canoeing down a certain stretch of river where you know a colony can be found up in the trees. Other ideas could include hunting down a 'smuggler's cave' or locating a 'mermaid's rock' along a featured coast – you know best what gets your kids excited, so tailor the trip accordingly and let your imagination run riot.

### TRAV'S TIPS

"Paddling close to shore means children can be on the lookout for lizards, snakes, fish, and other wildlife on the land. In our area we regularly see water dragons, lyrebirds, wombats, wallabies, kangaroos and goannas."

### Get them crewing

The great advantage that a canoe has over a kayak is that you can be in the same boat as your children. However, encourage them to be active crewmembers rather than passive passengers. Give them a paddle and get them involved from the start. This will give them a feel for the water, impart a sense of achievement and keep them warm, all at the same time. As they progress, teach them some basic strokes and skills. Let them make mistakes instead of compensating for them, so they quickly understand what consequence each action has.

### Fan the flames of enthusiasm

Plan pull-outs so they're at places where you can buy kids a treat such as an ice cream to reward them for their efforts (this will also keep them

occupied while you get the boat up on the car). After each trip, make them feel like they have really achieved something by showing them how far they've paddled on a map.

When conditions are right and the evenings are long and warm, consider taking kids on an overnight paddling trip – this is a great way to keep things exciting and memorable.

### TRAV'S TIPS

At camp, we often pull the canoes up on land and let the kids climb around and play in them without the worry of falling into the water. It really seems to increase their comfort with the boat and is probably something that could be done before even leaving home, to acclimatise them with the new mode of transport.

And finally, when you've taught them everything you know, why not enrol in a skills course together so you can learn more advanced techniques at the same time? Canoeing can be a great introduction to whitewater paddling, and before you know it, they'll be teaching you how to boat better.

"Canoeing is one of the most amazing ways kids can experience whitewater," says Jez xxxx, Captain of the Australian Freestyle Team, World Cup Champion and kids' canoeing coach. "It's like putting on training wheels for kids. Children often get apprehensive about being in a kayak, with a skirt locking them in, but canoeing is often a whole lot freer. Canoeing, from my experience, opens kids eyes to whitewater, a way of catching the bug that may lead to bigger things."

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. . .

Australia has myriad lakes, inlets and rivers that are perfect for families to explore by canoe (always check conditions and observe warnings).

Here are a few of our favourites:

**Victoria:** The Yarra, the Barwon and the Murray rivers offer great range of calm canoeing conditions.

**South Australia:** The Glenelg River, which flows through a breathtaking gorge that forms part of the border between Victoria and South Australia, is a stunning canoeing spot – great for a multiday trip.

**New South Wales:** The Upper Shoalhaven River Gorge in the southern tablelands is a fantastic spot to take the family canoeing.

The Hawkesbury also offers beautiful sections.

**Western Australia:** Both the Canning and the Swan rivers offer excellent canoeing spots, as does the Ord River in the Kimberley.

**Queensland:** The Noosa River, especially between Noosaville and Lake Cooribah, has fabulous family friendly canoeing.

**Tasmania:** The Pieman River through the Tarkine area is a stunning place to take the family canoeing.

**Northern Territory:** Always be mindful of crocodiles in the NT (observe signs). A canoe trip through the Flora River Nature Park southwest of Katherine is a great experience. In

Katherine itself, canoeing is a fantastic way to explore the upper gorges.

